# Assumption Breaker

Facilitator guide

**About this activity:** the team finishes the sentence “we can’t … because …”, then tests the reason after “because”. You are not here to decide whether each reason is true. You are here to test whether it is fixed. By the end, the team sorts its reasons into two groups — the ones that still look fixed, and the ones that may not be — and leaves with one 48-hour test.

**What is an assumption?** An assumption is a reason the team has stopped questioning.

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

## The right moment

Picture this: the team has been stuck on the same problem for weeks. Every time someone suggests a change, the answer is the same: “we can’t, because…”. The reasons sound like facts. Nobody tests them anymore. That is the moment for this activity.

### USE IT WHEN

You have one real, stuck problem with a clear “we can’t, because…” behind it. You can hear reasons spoken as if they were simply true — “we’ve always done it this way”, “leadership won’t agree”, “we don’t have the resources”.

### DO NOT USE IT WHEN

The team sees the problem differently and needs fresh options (use **Break the Frame**). A real limit has just arrived and the team must adapt (use **Decide Under Pressure**). The team only needs missing information, not a shift in how they think.

**The one test before you start:** can you hear a “because” spoken as if it were simply true? If yes, this is the tool. A strong “because” sounds almost like a fact. If it already sounds easy to argue with, it is probably not the real reason blocking the team.

· WHAT WILL THE TEAM LEAVE WITH?

## What you’ll leave with

### WHAT YOU GET

The reasons that were blocking progress without anyone noticing, named out loud. Proof of which ones are really fixed and which only felt fixed — the before and after ratings. One reason the team will stop treating as a fact, with a 48-hour test to prove it.

### WHY IT MATTERS

The team sees that a reason can be true today and still not be fixed — and that at least one “fact” it was sure of quietly moves. A problem that felt closed opens up again, and the team spends less time stuck behind reasons nobody has questioned.

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# PART 1 BEFORE THE ACTIVITY

get ready

1 · WHAT IS MY JOB HERE?

## Your job

Run this activity so the team tests its reasons instead of arguing about them. Do not decide whether a reason is true. Do not solve the problem yourself. Your job is to:

- write the problem in the "we can't … because …" form
- collect the reasons, then keep only the few that matter most
- collect the private ratings before and after, and write the average for each reason
- draw the cards and hold the one rule: test the reason, do not debate it
- keep time, and protect the last step — the 48-hour test

> **The one thing the team should learn:** when you are stuck, do not argue whether a reason is true. Test whether it is fixed. Some reasons are real limits. Many are only choices the team stopped questioning.

2 · WHO DOES WHAT?

## Roles

| Who | What they do |
|---|---|
| **You (facilitator)** | Run the activity. Write the problem on the board. Collect the reasons and the private ratings. Draw the Smash and Reframe cards. Hold the no-debate rule. Stay neutral — never argue for or against any reason. Keep time and protect the 48-hour test. |
| **The team (3–6)** | Surface the reasons behind "because". Rate how fixed each one feels, privately. Answer the challenge prompts about the reason — not whether it is true. Help define the 48-hour test. |

> **Say this to the team before you start (in your own words):** "We are stuck, and we keep giving reasons why. We will take those reasons and test whether they are really fixed — not argue whether they are true. Some will hold. Some will not. You will rate each reason on your own, so nobody's voice sets the number."

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3 · HOW DO I START?

## Opening script — 2 minutes

Say this in your own words before you start. Do not read the app page out loud.

> SAY
>
> “We have been stuck on this problem. Every time, we give the same reasons why we can’t move. Today we will not argue whether those reasons are true. We will test whether they are fixed. First we write the problem as ‘we can’t … because …’. Then we surface the reasons, rate how fixed each one feels, and challenge them one by one. At the end we rate them again and see which ones moved. We will leave with one reason we will stop treating as a fact, and one small test to run in the next 48 hours.”

4 · HOW DO I PREPARE?

## Setup and materials

WRITE THE PROBLEM THIS WAY

**We can’t** [the goal] **because** [the reason]

*The words after “because” are what you test.*

**How fixed does it feel? — privately**

5 = completely fixed

1 = may not be fixed at all

**before · and again after**

**Then sort into two groups**

Still looks fixed

May not be as fixed as we thought

↓

**48-HOUR TEST**

one concrete, reversible move to test the reason that dropped most

+ owner

Set the board out in this order — the sentence at the top, the ratings and the two groups in the middle, the 48-hour test at the foot. You fill it in as you go.

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| Material | What it is, and when you use it |
|---|---|
| **Situation cards (6)** | Each names a common stuck situation (for example, “something that worked before is not working now”). Optional — use only if the team has no real problem of its own. Otherwise set them aside. |
| **Assumption cards (12)** | Common “because” reasons teams treat as facts, in four families — Process, Market, Resource, Context. Used in step 2: hand them out as prompts if the team finds its own “because” hard to name. |
| **Smash cards (12)** | Challenge prompts that test one reason at a time (for example, “assume the opposite is true — what changes?”). Used in step 5: you draw one per reason; the team answers it as a temporary way of looking, not a debate. |
| **Reframe cards (6)** | Prompts that turn a reason that is now less fixed into a move — a small test, a decision, or a conversation. Used in step 7. |
| **Capture sheet** | One sheet. You write the reasons, the before and after ratings, the two groups, and the 48-hour test as the activity runs. |
| **Timer** | You use it to hold each step to time. The challenge step tends to overrun — hold it. |

> **Can the kit be changed?** Yes. The Assumption cards are prompts, not a fixed list — if the team’s real “because” is not among them, write your own. Use the Situation cards only when the team has no live problem to bring.

**Words to know:** a **“because”** is the reason the team gives for why it cannot move. **How fixed** a reason is means how hard it is to change — not whether it is true. A **Smash card** tests one reason; a **Reframe card** turns a reason that is now less fixed into a small move.

5 · HOW DO I WRITE THE PROBLEM?

## Get the sentence right first

This step decides whether the activity works. Write the problem as one sentence, in the team’s own words, in the “we can’t … because …” form. The words after “because” are what you test.

| Not this — hard to test | This — one reason to test |
|---|---|
| “Our delivery is too slow.” | “We can’t reduce delivery time because we don’t have enough people.” |
| “Things are difficult right now.” | “We can’t change the process because we’ve always done it this way.” |
| “The client is a problem.” | “We can’t drop the review step because the client expects it.” |

**Rule:** a good sentence has one clear reason after “because”. If it has several, you will surface them in the next step — start with the one the team says first.

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## PART 2 DURING THE ACTIVITY

run it

**Before you begin — 30-second check**

- ✓ The problem is written on the board in the "we can't … because …" form
- ✓ There is space for the reasons, the before and after ratings, and two groups
- ✓ The Assumption, Smash and Reframe cards, the capture sheet and the timer are ready
- ✓ The team understands the one rule: test the reason, do not debate whether it is true
- ✓ Everyone is ready to rate each reason privately, before anyone speaks

6 · WHAT DO I DO NOW?

# Run the activity

Name the stuck point › Surface the reasons › Pick the few that matter › Rate (private) › Challenge › Re-rate & sort › 48-hour test › Commit

### 1. Name the stuck point

4–5 min

Appoint yourself facilitator. As a team, agree the one real problem you are stuck on. Write it on the board in the form: **"We can't _____ because _____."** The words after "because" are what you will test. You write; the team talks.

### 2. Surface the reasons

7 min

Each person privately completes "We can't [the goal] because ___" — two or three endings. Then they read them out and you write each reason on the board. No defending, no explaining — just surface the reasons.

> **Say:** "Just the reason. We are not explaining it or defending it yet." If a team finds its own "because" hard to name, hand out the Assumption cards as prompts.

### 3. Pick the few that matter

4–5 min

Group reasons that say the same thing — ask the room; if people disagree, you decide. Each person silently marks the two they think block the team most. You tally and keep the top three to five. The problem-owner breaks any ties. You test these, not all of them.

### 4. Rate how fixed each one is

4–5 min

Privately, everyone rates each chosen reason for **how fixed it feels only** — not whether it is true, not how important it is. **5 = completely fixed. 1 = may not be fixed at all.** They write the number; nobody says it aloud. You collect them and write one average per reason — this is the "before".

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**5. Challenge the reasons**
8–10 min

Take one reason at a time. Draw a Smash card, read the prompt, and answer it about that reason — **go round the room once, one answer each, before anyone speaks twice.** A good answer names what would change if the reason were not fixed. Don't solve the problem yet — just capture what shifts in how the team sees the reason. Test the reason; do not debate whether it is true. If the room starts arguing "but it is true", draw another Smash card and move on.

> **Good answer:** "If we had more test environments, we could run tests at the same time and save two days." **Weak answer:** "But we don't have them." The first tests the reason. The second debates it.

**6. Re-rate and sort**
3 min

Everyone privately re-rates each reason on the same 5–1 scale. Write one average "after" beside the "before". Then compare the before and after ratings for each reason: a clear drop → **"May not be as fixed as we thought."** Barely moved → **"Still looks fixed."**

**7. Turn insight into action**
5 min

Pick the reason that dropped the most. The problem-owner draws a Reframe card and defines one concrete, reversible move to test that reason in the next 48 hours — a small test, a decision, or a conversation. You write it down with an owner.

> **Say:** "Write one action you can test in the next 48 hours. For example: 'On Thursday at 10am, I will ask Operations if we can use the staging environment for testing.'"

**8. Commit**
3 min

Each person completes: **"One 'because' I'll stop treating as a fact is ___."** You capture these and the 48-hour test, photograph the board, and send it to everyone before they leave.

**These times are indicative.** A full run is about 30–40 minutes for a team; if one person runs it alone to prepare, it is about 12–15 minutes. The time you need will vary with the complexity of the problem, the size of the team, and the time the team has available. The step that overruns is the challenge step (step 5). The step that gets squeezed is the 48-hour test (step 7) — protect it.

GOLDEN RULE

**Test the reason — do not debate whether it is true.** The moment people start arguing whether the reason is true, stop the discussion and test the next question instead. Say: "Stop. We are not deciding if this is true. We are testing if it is fixed." Then draw another Smash card and move on.

**One more thing:** a tested reason with a real 48-hour move beats five challenged reasons and no action. If time runs short, cut a challenge round — never the test.

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**While you run — when to step in, when to wait** · a principle, not a step

STEP IN

The room argues whether a reason is true. → Say: “We are testing if it is fixed, not if it is true.” Draw another Smash card.

Everyone agrees a reason can change straight away. → That is often no real testing. Draw a second Smash card and test it from another angle.

One person sets the rating out loud. → Ratings are private. Collect them before anyone speaks.

WAIT

The discussion gets loud or surprising. → Let it run; that is the reason becoming less fixed.

A reason will not move at all. → Leave it in “still looks fixed” and move on.

An answer sounds unrealistic. → Write down what would change anyway; judge it later.

## PART 3 AFTER THE ACTIVITY

use it again

7 · HOW DO I FINISH?

### Closing script — 2 minutes

SAY

“Today we saw something. We were not blocked by facts. We were blocked by reasons we had stopped testing. When we challenged them, some of the ones we were most sure of moved the most. Next time you hear ‘we can’t, because…’, do not argue whether it is true. Ask: is this actually fixed, or just familiar? You are leaving with one reason you will stop treating as a fact, and one test to run in the next 48 hours. Do it this week.”

**Before people leave — the finish check**

- ✓ The problem is written in the “we can’t … because …” form
- ✓ Three to five reasons were tested
- ✓ The before and after ratings are complete
- ✓ The reasons are sorted into the two groups
- ✓ One 48-hour test is written down, with an owner named
- ✓ A photo of the board or sheet has been taken and shared

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8 · DID WE GET A GOOD RESULT?

## Check your run

**GOOD RUN**

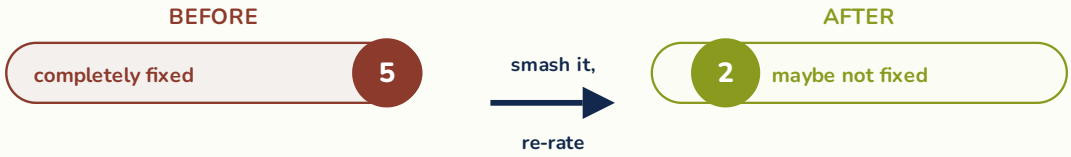
The reasons sit in two visible groups. At least one reason the team was sure of has dropped into “may not be as fixed as we thought”. There is a named 48-hour test against it, with an owner.

**WEAK RUN**

Every reason stayed a 5. The team argued whether each reason was true and made them all fixed again. There is no second group and no test. Going through the motions looks like agreement that nothing can change.

THE SAME REASON — RATED BEFORE, THEN AFTER

*“We can’t ship monthly because QA needs six weeks.”*




**“Six weeks” was a habit, not a law — the reason moved once we tested it.**

*Test whether it’s fixed — not whether it’s true.*

9 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS A HABIT?

## Build the habit — 30 seconds

**THE HABIT**

“Is this actually fixed — or just familiar?”

This week, when someone says “that can’t change”, stop and ask: is that actually fixed, or just a reason we have stopped testing? That one question, in normal work, is the lasting change — not the session itself.

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## Appendix · Reference

You should not need this while you run the activity. Read it before, or use it if something goes wrong.

10 · WHAT IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG?

# Recovery guide

| What happens | What to do or say |
|---|---|
| The room argues whether a reason is true | Say: “We are not deciding if this is true. We are testing if it is fixed.” Draw another Smash card and answer that instead. |
| Everyone agrees at once (“yes, obviously we could change that”) | Easy agreement usually means no real testing. Draw a second Smash card and test the reason from a different angle. The goal is not agreement — it is to see whether the reason holds up under a real challenge. |
| Nothing moves — every reason stays a 5 | Almost always debate, not real limits. Say: “Everything stayed a 5. Either these are real limits, or we debated instead of testing. Let us pick the most blocking reason and run one Smash card on it, with no discussion.” If it holds across two Smash cards, it may be a genuine limit — name it as one and move on. |
| People speak over each other | Pause. Say: “One at a time. I want to hear each answer.” Take the reasons in turn so nothing is lost. |
| A sharp disagreement breaks out | Step in. Say: “We are not deciding who is right. We are testing one reason. Write down what would change, and we look later.” Set it aside; right now the goal is to test, not to win. |
| Someone surfaces a fact, not a reason | Ask: “Could that reason ever be false?” If no, set it aside as a real limit. If yes, keep it and test it. |
| One person sets the rating for everyone | Ratings are private and individual. Collect them in writing before anyone speaks, so the loudest voice does not set the number. |
| A reason protects someone’s past decision | Keep it about the reason, not the person. Say: “If you were not responsible for that decision, what would you do?” |
| Time runs out before the test | Cut a challenge round, never the Reframe. Say: “We are short on time. We will go straight to the test step. One tested reason with a real action beats five challenged reasons and no action.” |

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11 · WHAT DO I WRITE DOWN?

## The capture sheet — what you fill in

One sheet runs the whole activity. You write on it throughout (or a nominated scribe does). It carries the before-and-after ratings and the two groups — the reveal — on a single page the team keeps.

**1 · THE REASONS WE SURFACED** — the "because" reasons, in the team's own words

...we don't have the people · ...we've always done it this way · ...the client expects every step

2 · HOW FIXED — BEFORE AND AFTER

| Reason (the "because") | Before | After |
|---|---|---|
| ...we don't have the people | 5 | 2 |
| ...we've always done it this way | 4 | 2 |
| ...the regulatory filing deadline | 5 | 5 |

**3 · MAY NOT BE AS FIXED AS WE THOUGHT** (the reasons that dropped the most)

✓ "We don't have the people" — dropped 5 → 2 · ✓ "We've always done it this way" — dropped 4 → 2

*Box 1 holds every reason. Box 2 fills with the private averages — first the "before", then the "after" beside it. Box 3 is the reveal: the reasons that dropped the most. Box 4 carries the one 48-hour test the team will run, with an owner.*

12 · WHAT DOES A GOOD RUN LOOK LIKE?

## Worked example

The stuck point: "We can't reduce our delivery cycle time." The team completes the sentence four ways and narrows to four reasons, then rates each one privately. Most start high — "we don't have the people to do it differently" is a unanimous 5. Then they challenge each one. One Smash card asked, on the resource reason — "assume you had to do it with the team you have; what changes?" — and the team saw that two review steps could run at the same time, and one is optional. Re-rated, it drops to a 2. "We've always done it this way" drops from 4 to 2. The regulatory filing deadline stays a 5 — a real limit. The point is not that everything moved. It is that the second group exists, and the reason the team was most sure of moved the most.

13 · WHAT GOES WRONG MOST OFTEN?

## Common mistakes

- **Debating instead of testing.** The single biggest failure. "But it is true" makes the reason fixed again. Hold the rule: test the reason, do not argue the truth.
- **Trying to challenge everything.** Group similar reasons and pick three to five. The narrowing step is not optional.
- **Surfacing facts, not reasons.** "The deadline is the 30th" is a fact. "We can't move faster because of the deadline" is a reason worth testing. If it can never be false, set it aside.
- **Skipping the private rating.** Without the "before" number there is no sort and no reveal. Always rate before challenging.
- **Stopping at the insight.** An insight with no 48-hour test is a wasted session. End with one move.

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14 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

## Other tools

| If the problem is... | Use this instead |
|---|---|
| People see the problem differently, not that a reason is treated as fixed | **Break the Frame** — "who else would see this differently?" |
| A real limit has just arrived and the team must adapt to it | **Decide Under Pressure** — find what is really stopping the team adapting. |
| The team cannot agree which option to back once options reopen | **Prioritise Under Pressure** — surface and resolve the different orderings. |

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